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ABSTRACT

Aspects of colleges that were important to parents of high school seniors for the process of selecting a college were assessed in a 1978-79 survey. A sample of parents of high school seniors who had combined Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test scores of 100 or greater and who were residents of six metropolitan areas in the United States were contacted through a mail questionnaire. Findings that may be useful to academic marketers include: factual, impersonal information (e.g., fields of study offered) were generally preferred through impersonal information media (e.g., college publications). Factual information that may differ according to a student's personal situation (e.g., financial information, career information) was most likely to be desired via college admissions officers. General qualitative information (e.g., general academic reputation) appeared to be preferred from a source that is not associated with the institution such as high school counselors. Current students and alumni were most likely to be considered the best sources of specific qualitative data (e.g., teaching reputation of faculty, social atmosphere). Parents of current students were viewed as a secondary role in conveying certain types of information to parents of prospective students. Parents thought that official college promotional resources were not very desirable media through which to convey information about institutional quality or reputation; and while students were considered to be sources of information about teaching, they were not preferred sources for more general qualitative information, except regarding social atmosphere. A bibliography is appended. (SW)

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MESSAGES AND MEDIA: TOWARD ENHANCED PERFORMANCE IN COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS OF PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

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Interest in the provision of information about colleges to prospective students has surfaced on both sides of the academic market: colleges are beginning to exploit the promotional principles and techniques of marketing in order to capture consumer attention and present their cases effectively to potential students; students (or consumer advocates who elect to speak on their behalf) are expressing an interest in more and better information to aid in the selection of a college. Considerable research has been directed toward these distinctive, but interrelated concerns. Institutional market research has focused primarily on students' sources of information and influences on students as they select the colleges to which they will apply and the college which they will attend (Chapman, 1980; Gilmour, 1978; Sullivan, 1976; Sullivan and Litten, 1976; University of California, 1980; Yankelovich, Skelly and White, 1978). "Consumerist" interests have focused primarily on the information about colleges that students, or their parents, desire. (Lenning and Cooper, 1978; Stark, 1978).

The research reported here was institutional market research, designed to aid a selective, national college communicate more effectively with students and their parents. It was conducted, however, with the belief that serving the infor-

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mation needs and desires of consumers would be in the best interests of the institution. We defined media broadly to include both publications and people, and hypothesized that particular media would be differentially effective in carrying specific information to a given audience. Media vary in versitility, credibility and authority, convenience and accessibility, cost, timeliness and efficiency. We examined our hypothesis by asking students and their parents what they most wanted to know about the colleges that they would consider and through what medium they would most like to obtain this information. The answers could help address the following questions: 1) what kinds of information about colleges are desired by prospective students and their parents? 2) if an institution desired to communicate certain information to a given audience, what medium would be most appropriate?

Parents are the audience examined in this paper. Research has identified parents as a major influence on the college decisions of high school seniors (Chapman, 1980; Davis, 1977-78; Sullivan, 1976; U. of California, 1980). Nevertheless, except for Lenning and Cooper's work, their information needs have received little direct research attention.

The Research and the Data

The research was conducted at Carleton College, in collaboration with The College Board. Details on the sample have been presented in other papers (Litten et. al., 1980) and will not be repeated here due to space constraints. Briefly, the respondents are the parents of 1978-79 high school seniors who had combined PSAT scores of 100 or greater; they were residents

of six metropolitan areas located throughout the United States. A response of 47% was obtained from a self-administered questionnaire mailed to 2,000 parents.

The questionnaire asked the respondent to rate 24 aspects of colleges according to their importance to the parent when a child chooses a college. They were then requested in an open-ended question to list the three most important aspects[1] and to identify their first and second choices of sources (media) for information about each of the aspects listed. Ten information sources were listed on the questionnaire, along with space in which the respondent could name additional sources.

The Results

Seven types of information were listed among the 3 most important things to know about a college by at least 10% of the parents. They are given in Table 1 (some are collapsed categories -- for example, three types of financial information were listed in the preceding question; they have all been included in our "financial" category). Financial information (price, financial aid, net cost, etc.) heads the list, with 54% of the parents who answered the question indicating that it is among the most important types of information. It is followed by information on fields of study offered (30%).

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[1]Although many of these responses were taken from the preceding list of 24 attributes, a total of 53 codes were developed to handle the full array of responses.

Table 1
First Choice for Specific Types
of Information Desired*
(percentages)

Type of Information	First Preference Medium: High School Counselor	College Admissions Officer	College Faculty	College Alumni	Current Students	Parent of Current Student	College Publications	Commercial Guidebooks	Other Medium	Total	N
Financial	7	48	2	1	4	5	29	4	-	100%	481
Fields of Study Offered	17	23	11	4	3	-	37	3	2	100%	270
Teaching Reputation or Ability of Faculty	16	6	13	27	17	-	3	10	8	100%	211
Academic Standards/General Quality	17	10	21	15	6	1	9	11	10	100%	158
Careers to which College Might Lead	15	20	13	26	4	-	12	4	6	100%	105
General Academic Reputation	23	6	3	16	7	3	10	16	16	100%	99
Social Atmosphere	3	4	3	14	60	5	5	2	4	100%	97

*Only one first-choice medium could be listed for each type of information by a given respondent.
Note: Highest percentage in each row is underlined.

The first-choice medium through which desired information is preferred differs markedly according to the type of information that is sought. Table 1 lists the principal types of information and media that parents listed.[1] With one exception, each type of information is most likely to be preferred through a different medium; with two exceptions, each medium emerges as the most frequently named first choice source for one of the types of information. A clear first choice source for financial information is the college admissions officer,

[1]Two of the 10 media listed on the questionnaire were very infrequently identified as a first or second choice information source: a high school teacher (non-counselor) or a rabbi/priest/minister.

followed distantly by college publications. Interest in the fields of study offered by the college is most likely to be satisfied by college publications, with an admissions officer the first choice of a smaller segment of parents. College faculty are most likely to be considered the best source of information on academic standards and the quality of the school's offerings, followed closely by high school counselors. Reputational information is likely to be preferred from non-collegiate sources. Alumni are the most frequent first choice source for information about the teaching reputation or ability of the faculty; high school counselors are the most frequently identified top choice for information on a college's general academic reputation. Career information is most often preferred from alumni, or from admissions officers. Current students are overwhelmingly the favored source of information about an institution's social atmosphere.

The survey asked about both first and second choice media for the information that parents most desire. For the most part, the media that were "runners-up" in the frequency with which they were named first choice media, are the most often named second choice sources of information. Noteworthy is the emergence of "parents of current students" as an important second-choice source of information in a number of areas. Parents are not listed as a first-choice source for any kind of information by other than a handful of respondents. They are cited, however, as a second-choice medium of information about social atmosphere by almost a third of the parents and for financial information by a fifth of the respondents.

In Table 2 first and second choice media are combined. College admissions officers are preferred by substantial numbers as the first or second choices for information about financial aspects of the college and careers to which the college might lead, and a close runner-up to college publications as a source of information about fields of study offered. Combining the first and second choices increases the relative size of the parents group that would turn to high school counselors for information about a college's general academic reputation as opposed to other sources for such information. Students remain

Table 2
Preferred Media (1st or 2nd Choice) for Specific Types of Information Desired*
(percentages)

Type of Information	First or Second Choice Media: High School Counselor	College Admissions Officer	College Faculty	College Alumni	Current Students	Parents of Current Students	College Publications	Commercial Guidebooks	N
Financial	17	66	4	4	13	24	50	15	481
Fields of Study Offered	30	48	22	11	14	2	54	15	270
Teaching Reputation or Ability of Faculty	24	15	19	44	43	11	10	20	211
Academic Standards/General Quality	27	23	34	27	20	11	15	18	158
Careers to which College Might Lead	32	47	30	38	9	1	21	10	105
General Academic Reputation	37	17	13	28	16	12	16	29	99
Social Atmosphere	5	11	9	38	84	37	14	4	97

*N for first-choice responses used in calculating percentages; rows do not add to 100% because respondent could list 2 media.
Note: Highest percentage in each row is underlined; dotted lines indicate close runners-up.

the overwhelmingly preferred source of information about social atmosphere, followed distantly by alumni and parents of current students. No clear pattern of preference for information about academic standards/general quality emerges, although faculty continue to be favored by the largest number of parents. Either alumni or current students could carry information about the teaching reputation or ability of the faculty to substantial numbers of parents, although alumni have a slight edge as first-choice medium.

Correlates of Media Preferences

Both for applied marketing purposes and for the understanding necessary for a theory of marketing communications, we sought evidence of attributes that might be associated with different media preferences. We examined the first choice media for one factual type of information (financial) and one reputational type of information (teaching ability) in relation to a number of variables: city of residence, the type of school that the parent listed as first choice for the child (public/private; selective/non-selective), parent's sex, parent's educational level, and size of the parent's alma mater. These analytic elaborations contributed some small insights into the different patterns of media preference.

Financial: The variables that we introduced provided little explanatory power regarding media preferences for financial information. The only statistically significant difference emerged for parents who listed a private college as first choice who were slightly more likely to prefer college admis-

sions officers as a source of information than parents who listed public institutions (53 vs. 44%).[1]

Teaching reputation or ability of faculty: Education had a small effect on preferred sources of information regarding teaching. The higher the level of the parents' education, the less likely that college admissions officers were the preferred source (12% for parents without degrees; 8% for those with bachelor's degrees; 2% among the graduate-educated).[2] The size of the undergraduate institution that the responding parent attended (for those with at least a bachelor's degree) had a systematic effect on media preferences for information on faculty teaching reputation. The smaller the parent's alma mater, the more likely they were to choose faculty as the first-choice source of such information (22% if parent's college had 4,000 or fewer students; 11% for colleges 4,001 - 10,000; 6% for parents from colleges with more than 10,000. There were also some interesting differences among the cities, but they are substantially more difficult to interpret. Some extreme examples of first-choice preferences for specific media are noted below:

Faculty	Twin Cities - 0	Texas - 28%
Alumni	Twin Cities - 39%	D.C. area - 14%

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[1]A two-tailed significance level of .05 was employed in all comparisons.

[2]This relationship was also observed for financial information but was not statistically significant.

One of the principal benefits of a marketing approach to institutional management is its attention to specialization (within limits). Efforts are made to match institutions and students, media to messages, and other organizational attributes to the particular needs of a specific clientele. One set of challenges for the academic marketer is to deliver information efficiently and to exploit media for their particular effectiveness, while avoiding overloading them. These data provide some preliminary clues regarding how that might be done when communicating with parents, an important influence on students' selection processes.

Specific medium/message linkages were discovered. Factual, impersonal information (e.g., fields of study offered) are generally preferred through impersonal information media (e.g., college publications). Factual information that may differ according to a student's personal situation (e.g., financial information, career information) is most likely to be desired via college admissions officers. General qualitative information (e.g., general academic reputation) appears to be preferred from a source that is not associated with the institution (e.g., high school counselors). Current students and alumni are most likely to be considered the best sources of specific qualitative data (e.g., teaching reputation of faculty, social atmosphere). Parents of current students could play a secondary role in conveying certain types of information to parents of prospective students; they are viewed by a substantial num-

types of information -- financial and social atmosphere.

The findings may be even clearer regarding inappropriate media. Official college promotional resources (admissions officers and publications) are not very desirable media through which to convey information about institutional quality or reputation; while students may be able to provide some particulars in this area (e.g., information about teaching), they are not preferred sources for more general qualitative information, except regarding social atmosphere.

Education appears to increase slightly a parent's willingness to deal directly with first-hand evidence regarding qualitative aspects of academic life. Higher levels of education appear to reduce the communication effectiveness of admissions officers. More personalized parental educational experiences appear to increase willingness to deal with faculty directly. There are also important differences in medium/message linkages among the various cities due perhaps to differences in culture or the nature of educational systems.

Several critical issues have not been addressed in this particular piece of research. They will need appropriate attention before a theory of academic marketing communications can be a reality and effective guidelines for the communications manager can be developed. It will certainly be important to expand the type of research reported here to other consumer groups; we will be reporting in the future on the results from our companion study of students. Both our students and the

corresponding parents sample are from a small segment of the college-bound population (the "high-ability" market) and a broader spectrum of academic "consumers" should be examined.

Specific linkages between preferred media and particular messages exist and some very modest correlates of media preference were observed. The functional reasons for these relationships were not studied, however. Are particular media preferred by the consumer for specific information because they are more accessable, cost less in time or money, can be made to carry more specific information (or prodded for contingent information--i.e., if the answer to my first question is "A", then my second question will be "B"), or because they are less threatening, etc.? From the institutional perspective, the economics of using specific media to carry specific messages have not been addressed--how much do they cost in money, in lead time, in control? can they be controlled? etc. And finally, how much specificity in media/message matching is economically defensible? Do the costs of using various media differ, particularly in view of their relative efficiencies? It costs time and money to prepare and monitor different messages for different media, even where there is no net difference in the costs of carrying the information via different media.

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